

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 25, 2012 at 5:04pm

Filipino archbishop: Priests must show Christ to a struggling church

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NCR Today

MANILA, Philippines -- Members of the clergy have a mission to convey God's love to all people, including those disillusioned and alienated by abuse of power and people by priests and religious, the archbishop of Manila told his clergy Monday before leaving for a ceremony in Rome.

Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila shared this and other reflections from the 50th International Eucharistic Congress in a homily to about 250 priests, bishops and other Massgoers at the Arzobispado de Manila chancery chapel Thursday. The eucharistic congress was held June 10-17 in Dublin.

One has to discern carefully "when you know that the church that you belong to is not anymore accepted by many," Tagle said.

"When its faith and belief system are being questioned, when its institutional expression seems to be contrary to what people want to believe, will you still commit? Will you still believe?" Tagle asked those at the Mass.

The International Eucharistic Congress, held every four years, aims to promote awareness of the Eucharist as central in the life and mission of the church, according to the congress' website. The congress also seeks to improve the understanding and celebration of the liturgy and to draw attention to the social dimension of the Eucharist.

Tagle attended the congress with 13 Philippines bishops, the largest group from a single bishops' conference, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines reported. During the week, Tagle spoke of sex abuse of minors by clergy in Asia and gave a catechesis on Communion in the Word through Mary.

At the Manila Mass last week, Tagle described scenes and events from the congress and reflected on how behavior in Ireland had changed since the 1932 congress. A video played at the congress' closing Mass showed delegates and pilgrims looking "so pious" as they greeted the papal legate and conducted prayer and worship, Tagle said.

Absence of faith

Among experiences that gave him a sense that people had lost faith in the church as an institution, Tagle cited a TV program that included four women chatting that he watched in his hotel. One said, "I don't go to Mass, so this eucharistic congress does not interest me. Why will I be interested? Mass means nothing to me."

The archbishop quoted another commentator: "Well, I am still a believer, but the institutional church does not embody my beliefs. The institution does not capture my faith, so I won't join anything that the institutional church proposes."

He remembers another saying: "They will probably spend 10 million Euros for this event. Will the tourists, the delegates, be able to infuse more than 10 million Euros to the Irish economy during these days? If not, then this is a losing proposition."

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One questioned the pope's absence.

"Rome is very near," she said. "He could have flown to Ireland. Of course, he is afraid to face the Irish people. There are so many things to answer for. He is afraid; he is a coward. So he sends us a video instead of being here in person."

Warning signs

Filipino Missionaries of Charity Sr. Perla joined the bishop's Mass in Manila on Thursday, which was also Tagle's birthday. The nun said she appreciated Tagle's stories because she experienced the disillusionment during her eight-month mission to Ireland last year.

"I know what (Tagle) is talking about," she told *NCR*. She said she felt "the big difference" between the attitudes toward religion, faith and the institutional church of Filipinos and the Irish people she met.

"I feel our country is blessed for the faith, even with the poverty and hunger, but then it is a shallow faith," the nun said. "There is the danger that what happened to Ireland can happen to us if Filipino Catholics will continue to have weak witness of what it takes to be a follower of Christ."

Sister Perla said while institutions are growing, "sometimes people can't even afford to get married on their own because it's too expensive. We need to reach out to church members, to evangelize them and help them see what is the deeper meaning of sacraments, so they don't see it as a matter of money."

Struggling Christianity

Tagle wondered whether child abuse charges against priests and religious institutions alone caused the disinterest he witnessed in Dublin.

Christianity has suffered around Europe, but in Ireland, constant abuse of youth and children by clergy and employees of religious institutions has been exposed, along with a pattern of coverup by authorities at every level of church, including the Vatican.

Tagle said the Irish bishops he talked to said abuse cases have driven a wedge among church members and clergy and stressed that the church is drifting not only in Ireland, but in many parts of Western Europe. One bishop cited the power the church in Ireland had enjoyed and its link with politicians, which people protested.

At the Manila Mass, Tagle said, "The vocation of the church is not to be powerful, especially in the worldly sense of the word. The church is called to humble service and where there is humble service. Where there is brute force and power, people don't seem to see the face of the Lord."

He said few young people and children joined events at the congress. He recalled how a girl assigned to assist his group of delegates at the closing events wondered why many groups of Filipinos approached Tagle to have their picture taken with him.

"Who are you? Why do people come to you?" he said the girl asked him. "Why do people want a photo with you? Who are you?"

"Well, I am a bishop of the Philippines, and they are my friends," Tagle said he responded. But the girl was serious in asking the question and she was not smiling.

"But I felt like she was probably wondering why people would approach a bishop," he said. "They should run away from a bishop. They are dangerous people."

In the forum on sexual abuse in Rome, that point was raised, Tagle said. He said in many schools in Europe, the program for child protection teaches the children not to trust priests and religious and call them child protection programs. He said he believed the girl was taught that.

Despite challenges, Tagle said what the congress provided and achieved are "priceless."

"In a eucharistic congress, you see this communion and you realize what the universal church is all about," the archbishop said, citing songs, readings and prayers using different languages.

"You all say 'Amen,' " he said.

For Tagle, the congress is also priceless "for the communion that happens in Christ and his Word, bringing people of different nations, even of nations that are at war with one another."

"Yes, I don't know how the Irish church will be able to pay for the expenses," he said. "But I'm sure priceless legacy has been obtained. And all of us who attended will bring with us, and others, priceless legacy."

At the closing event at Croke Park Stadium, Pope Benedict XVI announced in a video message that the 2016 congress would be held in Cebu, central Philippines.

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